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ABSTRACT

A study examined the use of dialectic (learning) journals in a grade 3 social studies class during the 1993-94 school year. The topic was "Communities Need Each Other," and categories used for the journals were: (1) What I Learned; (2) What It Means; (3) What It Means To Me and My Family; and (4) What It Means To The World. The eight subjects wrote their own journal entries in groups of four to five. Results indicated that the children saw their journals as a source of enjoyment and the teacher saw the journals as helpful as an evaluation tool. Findings support that the dialectic journals were very helpful as a tool to guide the subjects in the reflection, reshaping, and extension of their learning in social studies. (Contains three references.) (CR)

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How Dialectic Journals Were Used and Conceptualized in a Grade Three Social Studies Class

Monica Ellis

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I have been at teacher for 13 years. I spent two years teaching in an aboriginal community in Northern Alberta. I taught for the last 11 years in Edmonton, Alberta at the elementary level.

How Dialectic Journals Were Used and Conceptualized in a Grade Three Social Studies Class

Children's writing and the meanings they make have always interested me. As a new teacher I was always intrigued by my grade one's written thoughts in response to their worlds. A few years ago I became interested in how students might use a journal to make sense of their social studies content.

Background

During the 1993-94 school year I conducted a study to look at the use of dialectic journals in a grade three social studies class. D'Arcy (1987) writes that dialectic (learning) journals provide the space for reflecting, rehearsing, reshaping, and redrafting what we know. For three months I became an"action researcher"(Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988) in a grade three social studies class. The teacher and myself jointly planned and demonstrated the use of dialectic journals. I wanted to describe the experience of writing for eight grade three students when a "dialectic" journal was used. The children chosen for my study represented a cross-section of abilities. Some of these children were Nathan, Mariam, Karen, and Ross. The topic of study was,"Communities Need Each Other." Various data collection procedures were used which included participant observation, field notes, journalling, interviews, document collection, and transcribing.

Modeling and Format

The categories used for the journals were adapted from Phyllis R. Edwards (1992). They were as follows: What I Learned, What It Means, What It Means to Me and My Family, and What It Means to the World. The modeling of these categories was a significant factor in the success of the journals. We introduced a new category every week and brainstormed together on how we might write a entry in our journals. The students then wrote their own entries in groups of four or five.

Findings

The Meanings the Children Made

The journals were very helpful for consolidating and personalizing learning; they helped the children to see the "bigger picture." Karen demonstrated her understanding of the importance of trade when she wrote,"If we didn't have herbs and other supplies that we need we would be sicker longer than we thought and we wouldn't get new stuff." Karen's family frequently used herbal medicine and she was aware that her country depended on trade with other countries in order to get what they needed.

The journals helped children reflect on the differences among communities. Mariam demonstrated her understanding of the importance of trade when she wrote,"They get to try bread because they have fish, not wheat, we have wheat so we trade." She was comparing a coastal community with her prairie community and was able to verbalize what they both had to offer and why trade was important between the two.

The journals were useful for helping the children consider the "What if's?" When reflecting on the importation of electronic goods from Pacific Rim countries Ross contemplated life without computers. He wrote,"It means that we wouldn't have a computer or nintendo, a television, gameboy or supernintendo."

The children used their journals to reflect on the importance of goodwill between countries and sportsmanship. The Olympics took place at the time the children were writing. Ross was referring to one of the Olympic skiers when he wrote,"It means that when skiers fall they have to get right back on their feet and try again till you get it right and if we loose well say, 'O well there's always next year.'" The children wrote many interesting reflections in reference to the Olympics.

The children used the journals for reflecting on the importance of cultural acceptance. They were learning about the origins of names given to various cities and rivers. Nathan wrote,"I learned that the Indians call the North Saskatchewan river the 'kisisasatchewan.' It means that we have to accept the rule that some people speak a different language."

The children interpreted their social studies concepts through their own eyes and I saw different interpretations of the same content by the children..

Children's Views on the Journals

I was able to capture the children's feelings about the journals through informal interviews and conversations, they gave me very insightful feedback. The children perceived the purpose of the dialectic journal as different from personal journals. Karen compared the two saying,"In the social studies journals you write things down and tell what it means, like about foods, if we didn't have foods we would die of course." In reference to her personal journal she said,"It's just another way of telling people what we do during the weekend and things we look forward to and write poetries in it or stories like strange stories or poems." Ross described the difference between the two journals saying,"Different because you get to write stories in the other journal and in the social studies journal you get to write about things like the past and present."

The children commented on the reality that some weeks it was difficult for them to write about their learning as the content didn't lend itself to dialectic journal writing. Nathan told me,"Sometimes it's easy because you learned a lot that week, hard because you didn't learn

a lot that week." One week the children were learning about the use of an atlas and it was difficult for them to reflect on this in any sort of dialectic format. In reference to the atlas lesson Ross wrote," They use to have globes around the world now they have atlases."

Some of the children told me that they found the "What It Means" category difficult. I noticed that it was difficult for the children to restate their learning in this way and this is a category I would change or omit in the future.

Many of the children mentioned that the journals would be helpful to read over in the future when reviewing content from grade three and reflecting back on their elementary years. Karen commented,"This is for what you learned, when you grow up sometimes you like go to college, and you forget some details what you're working on, you look back on the ones when you were like in grade three."

The children saw the journals as a tool for communicating with the teacher and myself about their learning. Myriam said,"I can tell you and Mrs. Thomas about what I'm learning every week."

The children saw their journals as a source of enjoyment. Some of the students liked the privacy factor; they decided who could see them and who could not. Most of the children enjoyed sharing their writing with others and seeing their reactions; Ross said,"I've enjoyed writing and kind of telling what you're learning, stuff like that... and you could look back and show other people and they could say,'Wow!'" Francis commented,"They're fun to write in, you get to write a lot of things you learned."

Teacher's View of Journals

Laura, the classroom teacher, saw the journals as helpful as an evaluation tool. She commented that the journals helped her to see what meanings and concepts children were getting from the social studies content. The journals were not evaluated but she saw them as a means for evaluating her own teaching. She reflected on her teaching methods and choice of content and commented that she might change her way of teaching especially in cases where it appeared the children were having difficulty conceptualizing the lesson content.

Laura commented on the time commitment saying that they took up a great deal of time especially in the beginning stages but were well worth it.

Reflections and Conclusions

The dialectic journals were very helpful as a tool to guide the children in the reflection, reshaping, and extension of their learning in social studies. The experience of writing was different for each child and there is much to be learned from a study such as this.

1. **Be flexible with the headings.** The children may find the headings too difficult such as the "What It Means" category. Decide as a group what the headings should look like or let individual children re-word them.

2. **Not all topics lend themselves to dialectic journal writing.** You and your students will have to decide on what is appropriate subject material for dialectic journals. The students should be free to write about any societal or world issues, not just those discussed in the classroom.

3. **Modeling is important.** The format of a dialectic journal might be new to many of the students so modeling with continued interaction is key to their success. Dialectic writing should support a natural sequence of thought and language being used in the classroom.

4. **We must clearly define for our students the purpose and audience of the dialectic journals**. Journal writing by its very nature should be private and personal. The students have to know what type of journal they'll be working in and who the audience will be.

5. **Provide plenty of time for talking, sharing, and discussion.** Interaction and discussion are extremely important components in helping the students to make sense of their worlds through their writing.

6. **Make sure feedback is positive and supportive**. Students have to know that they are allowed to take risks with their thoughts and the meanings they make of their worlds. Feedback should be non-judgmental.

7. **Make sure learning is fun and student-centered** . A classroom that has a rich learning environment where children are stimulated and the subject material is relevant and exciting will provide for richer reflection in the journals.

The dialectic journals used in my study are but one vehicle for helping children make sense of their learning in social studies. As with any new idea they can be adapted and changed depending on the needs of the students. There are no limits to the possibilites for our student's writing and meaning-making in social studies.

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